

When School Anxiety Becomes School Avoidance

Practical guidance for understanding what may be happening underneath behavior and helping families move forward.

A stomachache Sunday night. Tears Monday morning. Frequent requests to stay home. Repeated trips to the nurse. Eventually: “I am not going.”

School anxiety and school avoidance can develop gradually. Avoidance can also reinforce anxiety.

The Avoidance Cycle

A child feels anxious about school. They avoid school. Anxiety temporarily decreases. Their brain learns that avoidance made them feel better. The next school day can feel even harder.

This is why responding with either pure force or unlimited avoidance can create difficulties. The goal is compassionate support combined with movement toward appropriate participation.

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Ask Better Questions

Instead of only asking, “Why will you not go?” explore: “Which part of school feels hardest?” “When does the anxiety start?” “What happens right before you want to leave?” and “Where at school do you feel safest?”

Specific questions produce useful information that can guide a support plan.

ETHOS SHORELINE REFLECTION

Look for patterns: when does anxiety rise, what does the child avoid, what provides immediate relief, and what support could make the next step manageable?

Related Ethos Shoreline pathway: Finding Our Way Back™

A Note for Parents

Behavior makes more sense when we understand what is happening underneath it. Ethos Shoreline resources are designed to help families build practical structure while protecting connection, responsibility, and belonging.

Educational Disclaimer: This resource is for general educational purposes and is not a substitute for individualized mental-health, medical, educational, or emergency services. Consider consulting an appropriately qualified professional when concerns are persistent, worsening, affecting daily functioning, or creating safety concerns.

